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"POPULAR MECHANICS:" A LACK OF COMPROMISE

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Meeting someone halfway, negotiating, and making an equal exchange are components of compromise. The art of compromise is not observed in Raymond Carver's short-story, "Popular Mechanics." The story takes a minimalist approach and portrays the marital break-up of an unhappy couple. In this story, readers can see the couple fighting over the custody of their innocent child. Unfortunately, their effort to do what is their own best interest undermines the safety of the child they both love. Blinded by their anger and disappointment, their misplaced intentions lead to the loss of what is the best of both of them—their child. The goal of obtaining custody of the baby starts off as an argument prompted by an instinctual parental need but quickly develops into a physical quarrel over one's power, dominance, and control over the other. Neither parent is willing to compromise. They both want the baby. Each is fixed on getting what he or she wants, no matter what the unintentional, tragic price that is ultimately paid. Tryon Edwards, an American theologian and editor, explains this facet of human nature best: "Compromise is but the sacrifice of one right or good in the hope of retaining another—too often ending in the loss of both" (57). By using a minimalist approach in "Popular Mechanics," Carver proves—in a harsh, but to-the-point way—how human nature can twist a person's mind opposite of compromise, resulting only in personal misfortune.

Critical readers see Carver's work as minimalist. Carver did not appreciate his work being labeled in this way; and like many writers of his time, he saw the labeling of his work as being a backhanded compliment. He resented this labeling because it often resulted in readers classifying his writings as simple, easy, and plain. Critic Michael Trussler states, "Carver was antagonistic to being described as a 'minimalist' writer" (25). The truth is, minimalism is an approach on literature using simple, easy, and plain techniques but in a way that maximizes the effects on a reader's mind. Categorizing an author as a minimalist is nothing more than calling Sir Isaac Newton a neo-classicist or Mark Twain a Realist. To be dubbed a Minimalist is truly a respectable classification. Trussler recognizes John Barth's interpretation of a Minimalist as merely an expression that "denotes praise" (23). What makes minimalists, such as Carver, so fascinating

is their ability to get their point across; even though minimalists eliminate a hand full of information from a story, they still capture the reader's imagination.

One of Carver's shortest short-stories is "Popular Mechanics." This story begins with a man and a woman in the middle of a domestic quarrel. The reader is not told how or why the argument starts; Carver throws the reader right into the middle of the situation. All the reader knows is that the man plans on leaving with the baby, and an argument ensues that literally turns into a physical tug-of-war over the child. Because so much information is absent, readers are drawn into the story and read on in the anticipation that their questions will be answered at the end. "Because the ending of the stories are truncated, the reader-as-literary-detective must often supply the conclusion," says critics Norman German and Jack Bedell (257). Carver is not a frank man, and he leaves the answering and solving up to the reader: "Carver does not editorialize, the reader must discover for himself the morals—or, if you prefer, meanings—of the stories" (German and Bedell 257). Carver also chooses not to personalize the characters by prescribing them with names, adding to the effect of his minimalist approach. His technique encourages readers to think on a different level, questioning and comparing the actions of the characters and the actions of people in today's world, precisely Carver's intentions. German and Bedell say, "he disguises his concern for man's moral deficiencies so as to intrude as little as possible between the fiction and the reader. The actions of the characters are sufficient to carry out his themes" (257). This method is what makes Carver's stories so powerful and captivating; "minimality gives [his stories] a certain bleak power," critic James Atlas says (qtd. in German and Bedell 257).

The central theme of "Popular Mechanics" is the fact that people today get so caught up in their own self-interests that they do not recognize how their selfishness hurts the ones they love. In society, divorce has become acceptable. Divorces can get nasty and some only end with law suits and custody battles. In too many cases, children become the battlefields. Blinded by their own needs and wants, parents often use their children as emotional weapons, not realizing the emotional and physical effect this torment has upon their children. Parents become overwhelmed, angry, and blinded by their own greed and egotism. Although most parents want the best for their children, they sometimes unknowingly make their children victims in their marital discord. Though, usually not to the extent of "Popular

Mechanics," divorce or break ups usually end with the scenario of the children being the misfortunate ones.

As the story begins, the argument between the couple seems routine: the man is packing his suitcase and the woman is "glad [the man is] leaving!" (Carver 248). Everything, to this point, seems normal, that is normal for a couple breaking up. However, the minute the woman notices the baby's picture on the bed, things start to turn in a different direction. Here in the story, the focus of the parents' anger toward one another shifts from their differences to the physical custody of their child: "He looked at her, and she wiped her eyes, and stared at him before turning and going back to the living room" (249). The woman realizes the man plans on taking the baby, and she is appalled that he would even think that he has the right to take the baby. This point, this moment in time, is where sadness and despair turn into anger—anger that only leads to violence. The woman must now defend her territory—she cradles her baby; the man may have custody over the image of the child through the photograph, but the woman grasps the actual icon—the baby. The woman feels that as long as she has the baby in her arms, as long as she can control the situation, then she can and will keep the baby. From the moment the man says, "I want the baby," the child itself is no longer looked at as a human being (249). Both parents strip this innocent infant of his life and soul, and replace this emptiness with nothing. This child is now only a material thing, referred to as "this baby" and "it" (249). German and Bedell agree with the fact that the parents are "disturbingly impersonalizing the child as an object to fight over—to the parents, a victory symbol and little else" (259). The child, once the object of their love, has now become the object of their anger and soon will become the victim of their physical tug-of-war.

As readers continue, they are horrified by the image Carver puts into their heads: a tug-of-war game literally develops with the mother on one side, the father on the other, and the helpless child torn between the two in the middle of their tussle. The woman has the advantage in the beginning, but the man quickly turns the table: "he reach[es] across the stove and tighten[s] his hands on the baby" (249). The man "[holds] on to the baby and push[es] with all his weight." He then "work[s] on [the woman's] fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he grip[s] the screaming baby up under an arm near [his] shoulder." The woman does not give up: "she [will] have it, this baby" (249). Carver makes this line so powerful and so malicious to reemphasize the fact that the baby is no longer a human being, but an object to fight over. The woman proceeds and "grab[s] for the baby's other arm. She [catches] the baby around the wrist and lean[s] back."

The man responds by “pull[ing] back very hard.” The last line of this ambiguous story, “in this manner, the issue [is] decided,” only adds to the dismal image in the reader’s mind. The reader can conclude that the “issue” is not in the child’s interests. By allowing their feelings of love and affection for one another to be replaced by equal portions of hatred and violence, the parents lose control of the situation. The child, once the cornerstone of their marriage, is victimized as the parent’s passions escalate uncontrollably and lead not only to the brokenness of their marriage but also to the brokenness of their child.

By incorporating this gruesome scene of the baby being potentially pulled apart, Carver is implying that the baby is like a “wishbone,” says German and Bedell (258). The reader can truly visualize the child being pulled apart. This image is also parallel to the Biblical story of Solomon and the two women prostitutes in 1 Kings 3. As this story goes, two women birthed two baby boys, three days apart. One of the baby boys dies, and “so [the dead son’s mother arises] in the middle of the night and [takes the other woman’s living son] from [her] side . . . and [lays] him in her bosom, and [lays] her dead child in [the other woman’s] bosom” (1 Kings 3:20). The two women approach Solomon for his wisdom on the matter and he suggests: “divide the living child in two, and give one half to one, and the other half to the other” (3:25). Thankfully, the true mother of the living child tells Solomon “give [the other mother] the living child” and begs him not to kill the infant (3:26). The false mother has no remorse for the child and is content with Solomon’s decision. Wise Solomon is now able to see who the true mother is, and he gives the child to her. Although the end result of Solomon’s story is the opposite to that of Carver’s, both stories show the same theme: “a selfish cruelty that often causes innocents to suffer” (German and Bedell 259).

What makes Carver’s story so sad is the fact that the reader knows the parents do love their son, but their ego-driven minds and their hatred toward each other are forced onto the child. German and Bedell say, “In the heat of the moment, both peaceful legal means and concerns of the baby are forgotten. . . . the parents adore the icon of their baby but are careless with the baby itself” (259). Carver portrays the baby as “red-faced and screaming”; the reader easily sympathizes with the helpless child and only wishes for the best (249). The fact that “Both [parents] have screamed at the other so often that they are immune to hostility—immune, even to [their] baby’s genuine screaming” is unfavorable (German and Bedell 260). Readers, who are also helpless, only read on with hopes that one of the stubborn parents will give-in to the fight. The reader hopes to see a compromise, a compromise that will end this terror. Tryon Edwards clarifies the actions of

the parents perfectly—both parents want what is “right [and] good” for their child, but they do not realize that the more they want, the more they fight for what they think is right, the further away their want becomes. Because neither the mother nor the father is willing to compromise, solely the laws of physics, which are not in the child’s favor, determine the fate of the baby.

Carver sets the scene for this story but leaves the outcome up to the reader. He gives readers the power to draw their own conclusions that will settle best in their minds. He alludes to certain images but never goes into grave detail. “It is precisely this invisibility, this concentration on omission, this narrative strategy of implying rather than stating or explaining, that engenders the paradox of Carver’s writing,” says Trussler (28). Taking a minimalist approach to any story is challenging because the writer takes on the risk of giving too much information or not giving enough. Carver is able to find this balance, and by leaving out the details that he does, he heightens the effect of the story. Trussler explains that “What draws us as readers to Carver’s work, what is so compelling in our dialogue with the texts, is the manner in which they manifest a dialectical relationship between the unsaid and the spoken” (35-36). Even with the minimalist approach that Carver employs, he is still able to portray his meaning and beliefs on human interactions in today’s society: “The violence and hatred of the characters [is parallel to that] of the present-day relationships” (German and Bedell 260). Carver shows readers through a “dark vision” how compromise is vital in any given situation (German and Bedell 260). Meeting someone halfway, negotiating, and making an equal exchange between others are all values that one must embrace to achieve that desired positive outcome.

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